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Strategic Iran

Twenty-five centuries have passed since Persia was the center of the civilized world. Today Iran is again the focus of world attention, but under quite different and far less happy circumstances. The coming of war to Korea has caused us to ponder on the next goal of Communist expansionism, and many signs point toward the Middle East, itself in crisis, torn between the East and the West. Of all the countries in that part of the world, Iran is probably the most vulnerable, and Communism already has its foot in the door.

One of the primary reasons why Iran is so important strategically is the geographical accident of its location in the narrow, water-bounded path connecting three continents (see Fig. 1). In ancient times it was a flourishing crossroads of great overland trade routes between the Mediterranean and the Far East, Russia and India, and Russia and the Persian Gulf. More recently, Stalin seemed ready to give Hitler all Europe and Africa in return for a free hand in Iran and Iraq. And in 1944, after the wartime occupation of Iran by the Allies, the Russians set up a puppet government in Iranian Azerbaijan and refused to withdraw until action was taken by the United Nations Security Council.

But of even greater significance at the moment, perhaps, is the position of Iran in the world distribution of resources. Its vast petroleum deposits, only recently exploited on a large scale, have made Iran the fourth-greatest oil producer in the world (after the United States, Venezuela, and the U. S. S. R.). Collectively, the oil-producing countries of the Middle East possess what are estimated to be the world's greatest petroleum reserves, and a threat to its oil fields is thus a threat to the oil-consuming nations of the West that depend on Middle Eastern production.

At the outbreak of World War I the British government acquired a controlling interest in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (A. I. O. C.) in order to safeguard deliveries of Persian oil for its Navy. Since then the largest single source of revenue of the Iranian government has been royalties and profits from the Company. Although these amounted to more than 54 million dollars by 1949, and the A. I. O. C. later offered to guarantee a yearly payment of 61 million dollars and almost double the royalty rate, the Iranian government apparently was not satisfied, and in April, 1951, it proclaimed nationalization of oil throughout the country, thus threatening to deprive Great Britain and Western Europe of their vital supply. What are some of the geographical factors that have led Iran to take this step?

In spite of the 80 million barrels of oil a year that

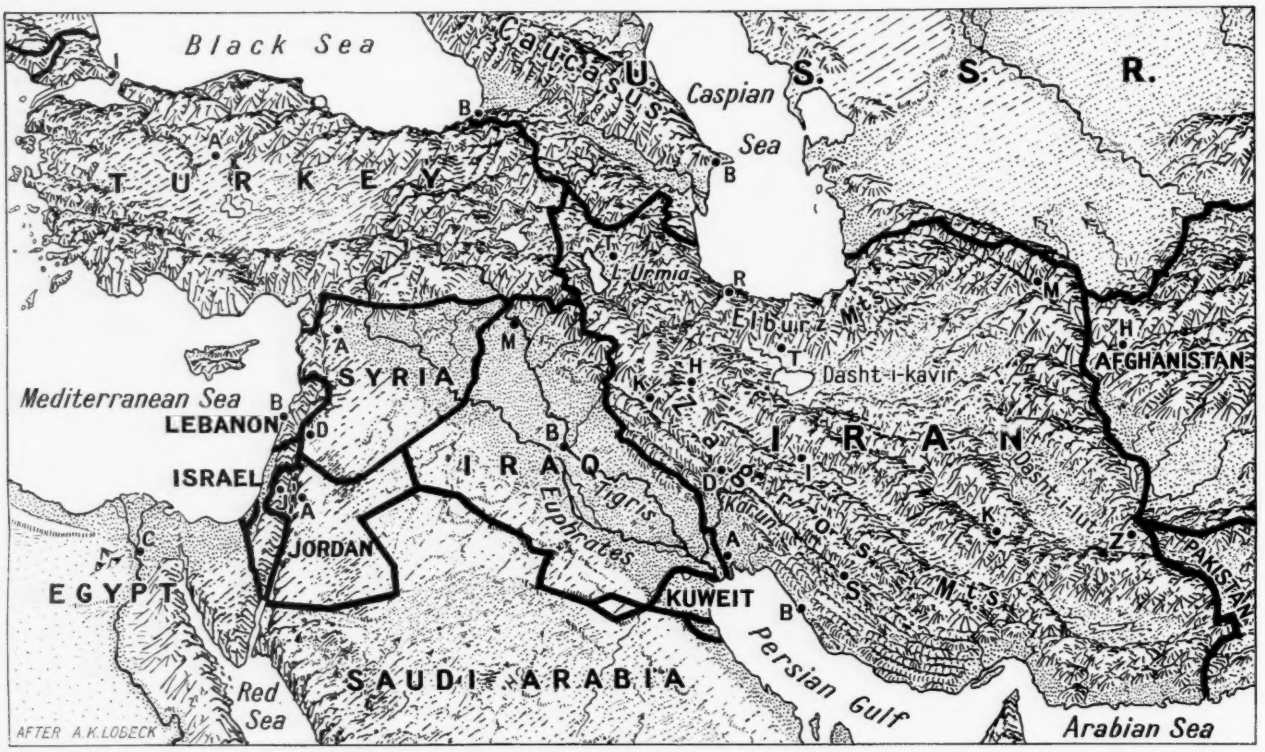

Fig. 1—Iran in the Middle East

are being extracted on the hot plains at the head of the Persian Gulf, most of the Iranian people are desperately poor, undernourished, ill, and uneducated. About 80 per cent of the 16-½ million people are dependent on agriculture and grazing in an area (the size of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas combined) where only 10 per cent of the land is cultivated and 15 per cent is grazing land. The rest is mountainous, or forest-covered, or barren desert.

Great mountain arcs sweep eastward around the northern, western, and southern margins of the central Iranian plateau. In the north, the rough, eroded Elburz Mountains rise in a series of folds to peaks as high as 18,000 feet within 30 miles of the Caspian shore, an effective barrier to the moisture-bearing northerly winds. As may be seen on the second map, the western Caspian coast and a strip along the western frontier are the only parts of the country that enjoy more than 40 inches of rainfall a year. Here temperatures are mild, humidity uncomfortably high during most of the year, and rice, citrus fruits, tobacco, tea, and silk are produced. They are the only parts of the country that produce more than enough food for local needs.

Along the western and southern margins of the plateau, the Zagros Mountains also act as a barrier to the rain-bearing winter winds that move eastward from the Mediterranean. Two million nomadic herdsmen, among them the Kurds, Lurs, and powerful Bakhtiari, suppliers of wool for the famous rug industry, migrate up the slopes in the spring in search of grass when the land below has become dry and brown. Only in the long, narrow valleys between the mountain folds can field crops such as wheat and barley be grown.

Within these mountain barriers lies the well-protected heart of Iran, an extensive plateau about 4,000 feet high, reputedly one of the worst deserts in the world. Rainfall averages 10 to 15 inches a year, and over a large area in the south and east is less than 5 inches. Except where small ranges surround basins of interior drainage, or where streams issuing from the bordering highlands support scattered oases of cultivation, such as Tehran, the plateau is a dry wasteland. A treacherous salt-incrusted surface (*kavir*) covers immense salt flats and marshes in the lower places, inviting the unwary to venture forth, only to be swallowed up in the quagmire beneath. In the oases crops, such as cotton in the west and wheat and barley in the interior, can be grown with the help of irrigation. Opium poppies and dates are important in the more arid areas.

Not only is water scarce in most of Iran, but temperatures are forbidding. Away from the Caspian coast, winters are more reminiscent of Siberia than of the subtropics, with temperatures frequently dropping to 0° F. in the north; frost is general, even in the south. In summer, temperatures rise during the day to more than 100° F. throughout much of the country and have been known to reach 125° at Abadan in August. Fortunately the nights bring some relief: a drop of 40° or 50° is not unusual. The extreme heat and dryness are intensified in the east by periodic winds of hurricane force. As might be expected, Iran's 11 million farming people have tended to concentrate in the north and west, where rainfall is more ample and temperatures more hospitable.

These grave disadvantages of terrain and climate have hindered the agricultural development of the country. But the extremely low standard of living of the overwhelming majority of the people may be attributed equally to the present system of land-ownership and farming methods. Usually a village or a string of villages is owned by a single individual or family. The owner, often residing in Tehran, furnishes the land, water, seed, and oxen for plowing and takes one-fifth of the crop for each of these four services. The peasant thus gets only one-fifth for his labor. Under normal conditions a farmer can produce about 200 bushels of grain a year; he must therefore support himself and his family on 40 bushels, or the equivalent of about $100 a year. If he is fortunate enough to own an ox, he may double that income.

Agricultural methods have changed but little during the centuries. It is estimated, for example, that the use of a plow which really turns the ground would mean an increase in crop yields of 35 to 40 per cent in areas where the natural vegetation has been untouched. Crop rotation, insect control, and the use of manures, fertilizers, and mechanical equipment would also do much to increase yields.

But above all else water is the limiting factor in the life and welfare of agricultural Iran. Irrigation is the fundamental land problem. More than 80 per cent of the irrigation water is ground water, laboriously collected by the "kanat system," by which ground water is brought to the surface by gravity at a suitable place downslope. Three or more kanats, each requiring two or three years of digging, are usually needed to supply water for a single village of 2,000 to 10,000 acres. In ancient times storage reservoirs were used to collect winter and spring runoff, but for more than a thousand years the dams destroyed during invasions have not been repaired.

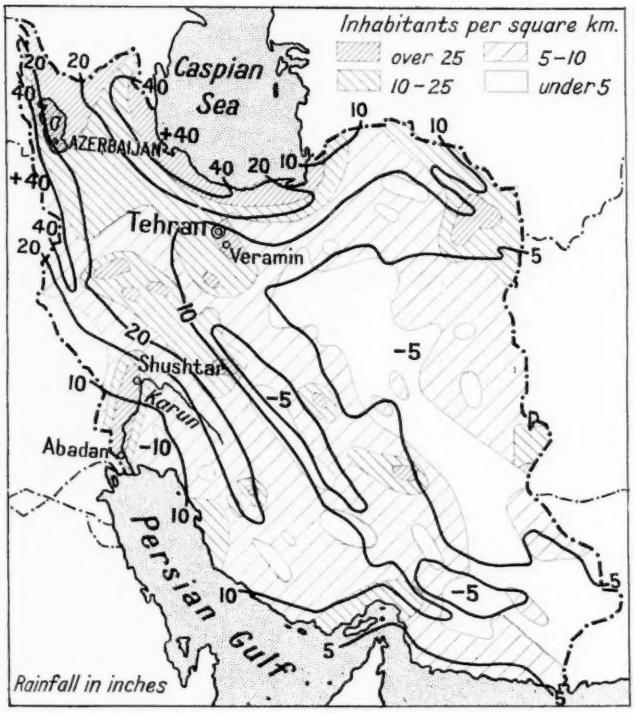

Fig. 2—Population and Mean Annual Rainfall

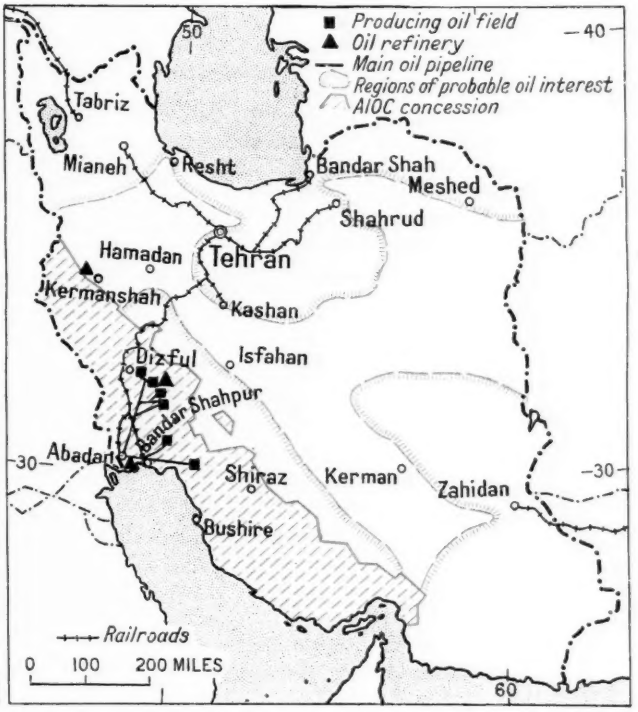

Fig. 3—Producing and Potential Oil Regions